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ABSTRACT

An approach to teaching stylistics, or writing style, to high school and college composition classes is described in this brief article. AUTHOR'S COMMENT (excerpt): Composition teachers generally recognize and appreciate grace in writing. But teaching or learning that grace is difficult at best. Perhaps style cannot easily be taught, but it can be recognized, analyzed, and imitated. Imitation is one device to hasten the acquisition of an individual's style. THE APPROACH (excerpt): First, a student is asked to copy verbatim a passage of published prose from a magazine such as "Harpers," "Esquire," or "Time." Full documentation follows the passage. Next, students are asked to imitate the original passage with a sample of their own writing. The forgery may or may not be on the same topic. The students' writing should, however, include the same number of sentences and approximately the same number of words as the original sample. Both pieces of writing are then submitted to the teacher and classmates who attempt to distinguish the published writing from the students' writing. This recognition is the beginning of an awareness of style. (KC)

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A Question of Style

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Level:
High school and college composition

No. 1
Now that she has said it, she was angry with herself for not having said it the night before, so that they would have had time to be finished with their weeping and their arguments. She had not trusted herself to withstand the night before; but now there was almost no time left. The center of her mind was filled with the image of the great clock at the railway station.

James Baldwin

No. 2
Not knowing what to do, she slowly pulled the covers over her face, so that the robber could do whatever he had to do without her seeing. She did not know what would happen while being blinded; but it was all over. She did not have a picture of the insane man who scared her so badly.

James Baldwin

Author's Comment:

Which is the forgery, and which is the published work? This is an example of the exercise and question I put before my students when beginning a lesson in stylistics. Teaching style, as opposed to dwelling on mechanical and grammatical conformity, is an elusive art, elusive because the word itself escapes exact definition. Perhaps Ella Fitzgerald's definition is adequate: "It ain't what you do, it's the way howdya do it."[1] At any rate, composition teachers generally recognize and appreciate grace in writing. Their own writing may contain this quality, and they certainly appreciate its appearance in students' compositions. But teaching or learning that grace is difficult at best. Perhaps style cannot easily be taught, but it can be recognized, analyzed, and imitated.

Imitating good writing has long been accepted as an excellent method of improving one's own style. This sentiment, expressed in Lewis Mumford's words on the subject, "The imitation of other artists is one of the means by which a person enriches and finally establishes his own individuality, and on the whole such imitation is more promising than an icing of originality that hardens too quickly," is echoed by others including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Dean Howells, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Somerset Maugham.[2] But championing imitation for its own sake is worthless; only when the imitation enables the imitator to appreciate the intricacies of good writing and transfer some of these literary devices into his own work does the exercise become worthwhile. The individual's experiences, knowledge, and opinions ultimately color his work, allowing the reader to see the author as much as the prose. Imitation then is but one device to hasten the acquisition of an individual's style, another tool to add to the writer's repertoire.

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The Approach

The forgery exercise is but one form of imitation. The form of the exercise is variable, the rules brief, the results astounding. First, a student is asked to copy verbatim a passage of published prose from a magazine such as *Harpers, Esquire,* or *Time.* Full documentation, including the author's name, the magazine title, volume, and date follow the passage.

Next, students are asked to imitate the original passage with a sample of their own writing. The forgery may or may not be on the same topic. The students' writing should, however, include the same number of sentences and approximately the same number of words as the original sample. Documentation of the students' writing will be presented exactly as that of the published sample to ensure the students' anonymity. Both pieces of writing are then submitted to the teacher and classmates who attempt to distinguish the published writing from the students' writing, generally an easy task even for unsophisticated readers and writers.

Once the original and forgery have been identified, an analysis of the two pieces of work can begin. Questions about how the identity was made often solicit comments about obvious non-standard usages that may appear in the forgery such as pronoun or verb agreement errors, verb tense shifts, misused words, or peculiar mechanical or punctuation usages. The value of this immediate response to the class as a whole and to the student writer in particular is that importance to conformity of standard usage and careful editing is stressed. The students can see exactly why one piece of writing is not as effective as another.

More adept students recognize the subtleties that begin to reach the core of stylistics: sentence variety and length, sentences types (balanced, cumulative, periodic), use of free modifiers, the reliance on concrete rather than abstract words, tone, balance, and effect. Although the students may not know the technical names of the structures, they recognize their effectiveness. This recognition, then, is the beginning of an awareness of style. From the recognition that style affects the reader's perception of the quality of writing comes the foundation for analyzing style. Teaching sentence patterns and their appropriate uses gives the writer additional control over his composition. Identifying compact, effective use of verbals and free modifiers eliminates the static voice of immature writing that plagues many beginning writers. Other elements of style, tricks of the trade, can be identified that will then be at the disposal of the improving writer.

Evaluation

Students' abilities often are underestimated by teachers who receive a set of compositions and read them with increasing despair. But I believe the students' ineptitudes and the teacher's despair can be overcome through imitative practices such as the forgery exercise. The results I have had with this exercise have been remarkably positive. Not only does the student's writing improve, but also his proof-reading ability. The one disadvantage this exercise can have is that the students may become so proficient in imitating styles that the exercise of "find the forgery" can well become one of "trick the teacher."[3]

Footnotes

[1]James C. Raymond, *Writing (Is an Unnatural Act),* Harper and Row, New York, 1980, p. 163.

[2]Frank J. D'Angelo, *Process and Thought in Composition,* Winthrop, Massachuttes, 1977, p. 301.

[3]Number two in the sample is the forgery.